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ABSTRACT

This paper is a product of Project COMPETE, a service demonstration project undertaken for the purpose of developing and validating a model and training sequence to improve transition services for moderately, severely, and profoundly retarded youth. The paper examines the need for cooperative programming across agencies serving this population and proposes directions for effective and comprehensive transition programming. Problems in current programming practices include lack of coordination across programs, lack of appropriate goals, and lack of focus on instructional needs of learners. Better programming requires: (1) goal and objective specification; (2) interagency cooperation and planning; (3) cooperative training of staff; and (4) consumer involvement and marketing strategies. Stressed throughout is the importance of training--training individuals with severe handicaps, training direct service personnel, training supervisory staff, and training community employers. (DB)

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POSITION PAPER

Effective Transition Programming
For Severely Handicapped Individuals

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Working Paper #87-1

Project COMPETE (Community-based Model for Public school Exit and Transition to Employment) is a service demonstration project funded to investigate secondary education and transition services for severely handicapped youth. COMPETE is a cooperative effort between the Center for Innovation in Teaching the Handicapped at Indiana University, and agencies in Columbus and Seymour, Indiana: Developmental Services, Inc., and the Bartholomew County Special Services Cooperative.

The purpose of COMPETE is to develop and validate a model that applies the results of previous research and exemplary practices. Project COMPETE is developing a training sequence to assist moderately, severely, and profoundly retarded youth in making the transition from school to employment in the competitive environment possible. COMPETE is also concentrating on establishing formal linkages between the rehabilitation center and the public school system in order to ensure a totally integrated continuum of preparation for youth from secondary through post-secondary levels.

The attached working paper is one product of this project. For more information on Project COMPETE please contact either of the project staff below.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the nation the work of Paul Wehman, Frank Rusch, and others clearly demonstrates that low-functioning individuals can be taught to perform meaningful work in community settings. In addition, local agencies have been providing similar demonstrations for years with little or no publicity. For example, the Northwest Indiana Special Education Cooperative has operated a community work training program for moderately retarded youth since 1978. Data from these projects (and others which could be cited) add weight to the conclusion that the technology of job training for moderately and severely retarded individuals is available and that such training can be an integral component of on-going instructional programs.

Training for transition from school to adult life has become a popular concept in recent years. It must be noted that the challenge of effective and comprehensive transition programming is probably larger than just that of vocational training (Halpern 1985). In fact, service agencies may do retarded persons a disservice by focusing only on vocational programming and neglecting other aspects of community life. Clearly, severely handicapped persons need a social life and friends just as does anyone else. Unfortunately, however, they are less likely to develop satisfying social relationships than most persons (Kregel, Wehman, Seyforth & Marshall, 1986). In plain language, it is very difficult for severely handicapped persons to fit into most social and leisure situations. There are many examples of persons who have learned to perform jobs while in school and/or a rehabilitation center, but who have no social life after they enter competitive employment: they get up, go to work, come home, and get ready to get up the next day to go to work. Then on weekends, they wait for Monday so that they can get up and go to work again. Although the income and social status provided by competitive employment can

facilitate community integration (Will, 1984), most severely handicapped persons do not automatically become independent adults even with the best of vocational training. Those who plan programs must understand that "transition" requires a focus on training for life, not just work skills.

Even if vocational training remains the primary focus of programming efforts, it has become apparent through experience that a great deal of effort will be required to build adequate programs. One of the most pervasive problems in providing transition services for retarded persons is the need for cooperation across the agencies that serve them (McDonnell, Wilcox & Boles, 1986). This paper will examine the need for cooperative programming and propose some directions for exploration for effective and comprehensive transition programming.

PROBLEMS IN TRANSITION PROGRAMMING

Effective transition programming requires unprecedented cooperation among the various service providers at all levels of service delivery (Brolin, 1985). Because retarded people often need instruction that extends beyond the school years, they would be better served if the various agencies (e.g., public schools, rehabilitation centers) would coordinate their instructional programs. Given (a) the vulnerability of severely handicapped people to inappropriate and inefficient programming, and (b) the length of time required even for good training to take full effect, the need for cooperation becomes imperative.

A number of problems in current programming practices have become apparent. Taken together, these problems make the case for the need for cooperation among agencies.

Current Lack of Coordination Across Programs

Effective cooperative programming across school and adult service programs is rare (Wehman, Moon & McCarthy, 1986; McDonnell & Hardman, 1985). But local agencies may be taking their cues from the federal and state agencies: for example, most federally-funded transition research and demonstration projects in the United States are being conducted either in the schools, in rehabilitation agencies, or in systems developed specifically for the purpose of providing transition services. Only a very few projects are attempting to break down the barriers between existing agencies and develop cooperative programming across agencies. This agency-specific structure is mirrored on the local level, where experience demonstrates that instructional programs are usually self-contained, with little or no attempt being made to interface with the training efforts of other agencies. For example, school programs do not often seek the advice of rehabilitation centers and other adult service agencies to discover what skills learners should have when they leave school. Similarly, adult service agencies often do not try to build upon the instruction provided in the schools. Even within the multi-service rehabilitation agencies, group home programs often do not coordinate their training with that found in work training programs, and leisure activity programs do not try to build on the programs developed in day programs. Consequently, instruction is fragmented, and much complementary instruction that could be carried out simply does not happen. Public schools, rehabilitation centers, and other community agencies that have training programs (such as in group homes) each have strengths or potential strengths in specific areas of instruction. They should not only capitalize upon these strengths, they should also feed into and rely upon the strengths of the other agencies.

Lack of Appropriate Goals

Lou Brown, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, is often quoted as saying, "Pre means never". That is, training programs that use the term "pre" in their titles tend to provide services that actually increase dependence rather than decrease it. Indeed, experience shows that the type of work training provided to low-functioning individuals (both in schools and rehabilitation centers) often has little or no connection with employment opportunities available to them following training. For example, despite numerous demonstrations of the ability of retarded persons to learn to perform competently in competitive employment settings, many (if not most) prevocational and sheltered work training programs focus on teaching students or clients to perform factory-like bench assembly tasks (Wehman, Moon & McCarthy, 1986). Although most low-functioning persons can learn to do this type of work, the record suggests that it is extremely difficult for them to find factory jobs following training. They are much more likely to find entry-level jobs in service industries, e.g., food service and janitorial jobs (Wehman, Hill, Hill, Brooke, Pendleton & Britt, 1985), and their training would be more appropriate if it were aimed in this direction. If various agencies could work together to develop coordinated training programs, it might be possible to develop continuous, long-range programming that takes into account the realities of today's world of work. Such a joint effort could produce some very powerful instructional programs.

However, the question of just what skills are required in order to take control over one's own life is still open (Dever, 1985). It may well be the most significant question in all of transition research. Those who work with severely handicapped persons must attend to the requirements of both the vocational and non-vocational environments into which severely handicapped

people will move at the end of their training. These requirements are often less than we have thought. Probes are already being made in this direction: for example, the place of academic instruction in the training of severely handicapped persons is currently being reevaluated in public schools (Wilcox & Bellamy, 1982). Similarly, the place of benchwork is being reevaluated in adult work training programs. Much the same reevaluation of the relationship between instructional content and desired outcomes must take place in each of the agencies concerned with providing services to severely handicapped persons.

Lack of Focus on Instructional Needs of Learners

Far more is known about instructional technology than was true ten years ago, and those who develop work training programs may be surprised to find that teaching low-functioning people to perform real jobs can be a relatively simple task. The staff of Project COMPETE, for example, has sometimes found that very little training is required to teach some moderately retarded young persons to perform a job. Other low-functioning people take a longer time, of course, and some may never learn to perform at industry standards despite intensive training efforts. Nevertheless, the development of vocational competence is often much easier than many expect. At the same time, however, it can also be more difficult than many expect because of the time spans required to deliver appropriate instruction to severely handicapped persons.

Vocational training is being provided to severely handicapped youth quite successfully in some public schools. The school personnel in these programs can feel justly proud when their low-functioning learners graduate and go on to full-time competitive employment right out of school as a result of their preparation. But these graduates require steady follow-along services

after placement for two reasons: (a) workers can and do lose their jobs, e.g., an owner can sell a business, and workers can be laid off or fired (among other things); and (b) following the loss of a job, it is often the case that only a brief intervention is required to make the necessary instructional adjustments that will allow a worker to maintain his/her job or learn a new one. Unfortunately, severely retarded persons who lose jobs often stay out of work, sometimes for many years. Clearly, many severely handicapped people require services that extend beyond the time at which they leave the public schools and enter adult life in the community. Some will require follow-along and support services throughout their entire employment careers, and work training programs that operate without respect to other services can place these individuals in jeopardy. Open communication and cooperative effort that is focused on goal-oriented instructional programming can help maintain severely handicapped persons in the community.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on existing research and a number of years of field experience, we have several suggestions to make. In the interest of better programming, we offer the following:

Goal and Objective Specification

Each service agency should try to make clear statements of the skills required for entry into the various programs options and levels. At present, there is a great deal of reliance on what is known to be irrelevant factors, e.g., IQ scores and other inappropriate assessment data. Project COMPETE has encountered a number of persons whose evaluations state that they cannot (now or ever) enter competitive employment, but who nonetheless are doing fine work in competitive employment settings. If each agency could develop statements of realistic entry skills and program objectives, it would facilitate the

development of individual transition plans (ITPs) and subsequent training programs that lead toward placement in and movement through those programs.

Interagency Cooperation and Planning

State funding agencies must encourage cooperative programming among field service agencies. Experience indicates that such cooperation is difficult to accomplish, and that the difficulty is compounded by the fact that line staff in various service agencies do not perceive the state agencies as desirous of cooperative programming. Perceptions exert control over action, and those doing the work need to get the message that all the state agencies are working together to develop good programming. At present, for example, many different state agencies are supporting work training programs for severely handicapped persons. If key staff from each of these programs were to be assembled on a regular basis to discuss common issues, a strong message would be sent to those who are doing the job.

Cooperative Training

The training of staff is often ineffective or unrelated to actual training needs. For example, many (if not most) school teachers who work with secondary level severely handicapped persons have been trained as elementary teachers of mildly handicapped children; many professionals in rehabilitation find it difficult to obtain training near their homes; adult daily activity, work activity, work adjustment and group home staff are selected from various disciplines and are expected to learn on the job; leisure activity staff often consist of paraprofessionals who have little or no training of any kind; etc., etc.

All staff who work with severely handicapped persons have training needs in common with one another. Many positive effects could accrue to group home staff, rehabilitation professionals, public school teachers, and adult daily

living and activity staff if they were provided common training programs. Moreover, common training could foster the development of a joint appreciation of the problems and capabilities of all disciplines. This awareness could be one of the first steps in developing a basis for cooperative programming among the staff from the various administrative organizations.

Consumer Involvement and Marketing Strategies

Training of severely handicapped persons in fundamental work habits and attitudes (or any other training) that begins at the age of 18 may be too little, too late. Recent research by Project COMPETE staff (Easterday, Dever & Sitlington, 1987) has focused on identifying worker traits preferred by employers with entry-level minimum-wage jobs in small businesses. The data indicate that these employers are more interested in employees who have appropriate work habits, attitudes, and interpersonal skills than they are in getting tax credits, paying subminimum wage, or even hiring workers who already know how to perform specific tasks. This information indicates that vocational training programs can begin at an early point in the learners' careers, and progress toward eventual placement in work settings. Obviously, the degree of required cooperation among the various agencies for such a lengthy and encompassing program would be very great indeed.

To assist severely handicapped people in becoming competent and valued employees, public school and rehabilitation center programs should consider the possibility of adopting a marketing (as opposed to a sales) strategy (whereas sales strategies attempt to get people to buy products they do not necessarily want or need, marketing strategies try to find out what people want and/or need, and then develop a product to respond to the data). One possibility for such a strategy is: (a) determine local occupations that represent not only initial occupational access, but also long-term employment

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stability for the foreseeable future; (b) survey employers to determine factors which influence the initial decision to hire an employee, whether handicapped or nonhandicapped; (c) identify both employer-valued worker traits, and specific skills and competencies of work settings; (d) develop an on-going system for obtaining employers' evaluative feedback regarding the work performance of severely handicapped employees; and (e) adjust marketing tactics and student/client training programs as information from other four components develops (Easterday, Dever & Sitlington, 1987).

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

From our point of view, the key to effective transitional programming lies in training. Severely handicapped individuals require focused, deliberate instruction to become functioning members of the community; direct service personnel need ongoing training to provide meaningful instruction for their student/clients; and supervisory staff need training to keep the whole enterprise moving forward. Even community employers need training because they are the ones who must take over the ongoing supervision of their severely handicapped employees if the job trainers have really done their job. The time spent in carrying out such training would be well-spent: effective transition programming is well within the realm of possibility, and we should make every effort to find ways to carry it out.

The technology for effective transition programming is available for use should we choose to employ it. The real problem confronting those who wish to see severely handicapped persons enter competitive employment (and indeed, life) in the least restrictive environment is to find and implement the most productive mechanisms for achieving this objective. However, no single agency is in a position to do all of the required work for the majority of severely handicapped persons. Rather, it will take the concerted efforts of all

agencies to carry the idea into the reality, and the efforts must be cooperative.

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